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<b>NIKKEI</b>	11,276.91	-12.58

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Published January 24, 2005

## Balancing Singapore's diverse urban planning needs

By **KALPANA RASHIWALA**

(SINGAPORE) 'It's a bit of the unseen hand that's always working. It's there, looking after everybody but sometimes not seen.' This is how Urban Redevelopment Authority chief executive Cheong Koon Hean describes the role of urban planning.

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'In this small plot of land just 697 square kilometres, we have to take care of everything - whether it's housing, commerce, recreation and schools - and ensuring we also have enough place for defence, water catchment, utilities, plants.

'People think it just happens, but it doesn't. It's a lot of work to make sure it can happen, and yet happen well so that you still maintain the quality of life, particularly when the population will grow. We're going to have a more and more dense environment and at the same time, you must make this place a really good place to live and work in.

'So planning is also a lot of balancing,' says Mrs Cheong. She seem fond of using the word 'balance', reflecting the somewhat diverse goals Singapore's planning authority has had to juggle with since it was set up.

Mrs Cheong lists comprehensive and integrated planning over the long-term as one of URA's biggest achievements in its 30-year history.

It has helped the transformation of the city centre. 'We've really moved from being slums to a modern metropolis through

planning, amalgamation of land, and many other instruments that have worked very well for us.'

The Government Land Sales programme has been a key tool that URA has used to transform its vision from plan to reality. Rejuvenating the city is not just about the Central Business District but the ability to create very distinctive characters for districts, explains Mrs Cheong.

She cites as an example the Bugis area, which is shaping up as an arts, cultural, entertainment and learning hub.

The fruits of the authority's conservation policy are also a considerable source of pride for Mrs Cheong, who took over the top post at URA in April last year. Some 6,400 buildings (including shophouses) have been conserved over the past 15 years or so.

'It's an achievement. Given our small land (area), to be able to conserve in itself is not easy. Particularly in the days when growth was so heated, we were under a lot of pressure to pull down and build higher. That would have been the easy route to take.

'But in the end, planning is about balance. It's not just about the economic but the social. It's about keeping memories, it's about identities.

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It's about nation building.'



Mrs Cheong dismisses the criticism that URA's conservation policy, especially of shophouses in traditional areas like Chinatown, has driven up the cost base of properties and in the process driven out traditional trades from the areas.

'We take a more pragmatic approach. Conservation isn't necessarily just about keeping the old buildings and old trades. I think conservation is recognising the built heritage that you have. But it's also about recognising that the world changes and you need to adapt, you need to allow adaptive re-use of these buildings for good economic uses and good social uses. Things cannot freeze in time,' she expounds.

'You must recognise reality. For owners to maintain and upkeep this built heritage for posterity, the properties have to be put to uses that are reasonably economic for upkeep. For them to want to restore (buildings), there must be an incentive for them. We must take a very realistic approach to heritage,' says Mrs Cheong.

'Because either that, or you don't get to keep them at all,' she warns.

'I think URA has chosen the path that again balances between recognising economic realities and knowing that it is very important to keep our built heritage. So I think that is what we have and I think to a certain degree, it has been successful.'

The conservation policy has also helped to create visual distinctiveness in the cityscape - which she lists as yet another of URA's achievements.

She gives an example. 'One is Singapore River. The imagery is quite iconic. You have the river and all the shophouses there, but behind it is all the high rise, which is the heart of the business district.

'That speaks so much of Singapore, contrasting the old and new. The balance between the past and the future. Through urban design, you're able to keep some of these things and appreciate them.'

The transformation of Tanjong Rhu from shipyards to a waterfront housing district, and the creation of public open spaces along Orchard Road are more examples of the products of conscious design guidelines laid down by URA.

Going forward, a major challenge for the authority will be repeating the tough act it has created.

'Our job continues to be able to maintain a very high quality of living and working environment for Singaporeans as well as all the visitors to Singapore and the people who come here to do business.

'It's not easy because the population will grow. We'll become more dense. How do you meet all these needs, particularly providing land for all these needs?

'Not only that. Expectations and aspirations have really increased, particularly of Singaporeans. They're more educated, very widely travelled. They know what's the best in the world. How do you meet all these expectations and aspirations? That will remain a very strong challenge for URA.'

Along with maintaining the quality of life, URA's planning efforts will have to address a fast-changing globalised world, and try to meet competition from other cities, Mrs Cheong says.

The Colombo Plan scholar, who holds degrees in architecture and urban development planning, has been with URA and its parent, the Ministry of National Development, for the past 15 years.

Mrs Cheong strives to achieve balance not only in juggling the URA's various goals but also achieving harmony between her work and personal lives.

'You just have to be quite disciplined and divide your time. Everybody has the same 24 hours,' says the perfectly coiffeured, 47-year-old mother of two boys. Most evenings are spent with her two sons and her husband, who is a financial consultant.

Mrs Cheong also plays the piano and guitar to relax. 'I don't have a favourite composer. I like many, and I play a whole range, from classical to pop.' A balanced answer.

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